

Through the Eyes of a College Intern

A Summer Hire's First DoD Experience Provides Valuable Insights

Rachel Schwarz

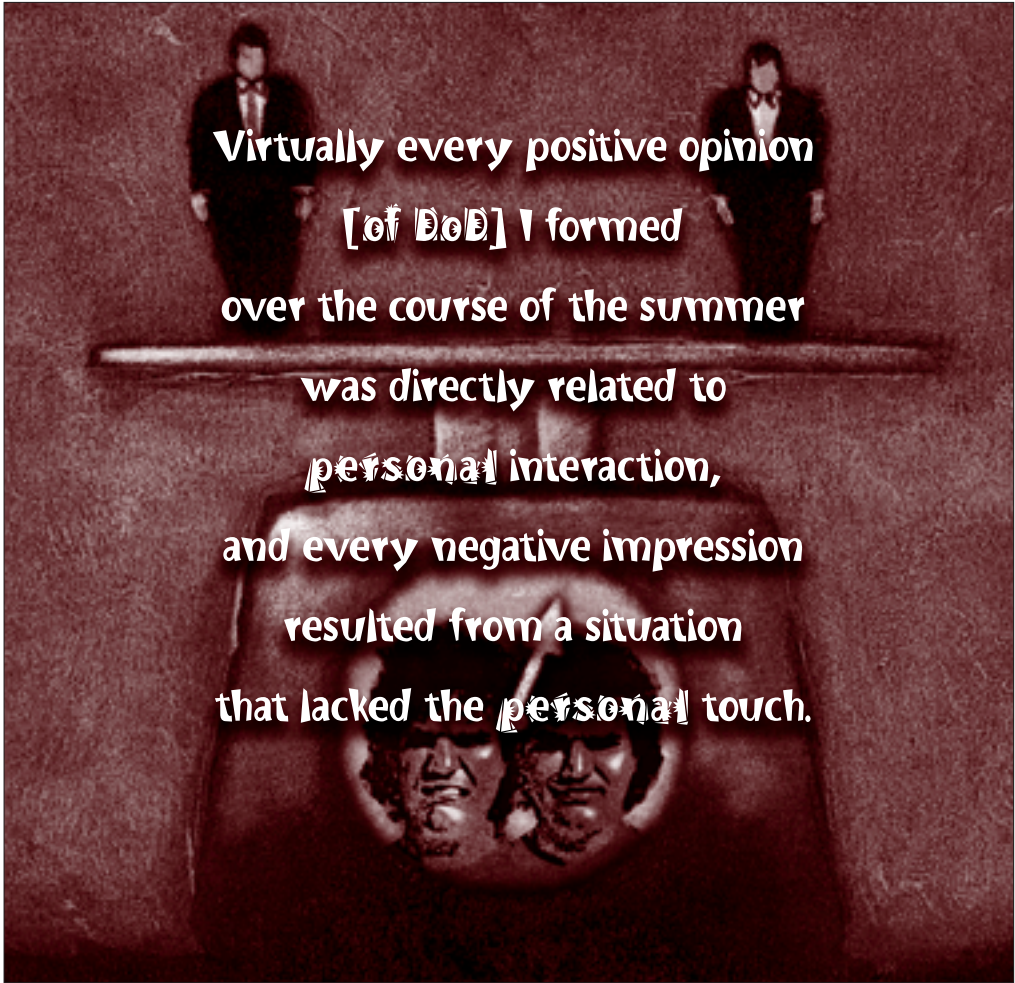
A “real” job—yuck! I like to work hard, especially when it comes to sports, hobbies, and going for the gusto. But throughout my young adult life, I never thought—really thought—the day would come when I would have to find a “real” job. Lucky for me, it still hasn’t, but with my graduation date quickly approaching, I decided there was no better time than the 2003 summer vacation to obtain real world experience. Deploying my best energies and working all the angles I could, I landed a summer internship in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) working with acquisition education, training and career development (AET&CD) and the Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration Project (AcqDemo).

The Personal Touch

As a young college student, I represent the demographic that is currently one of the government’s primary hiring targets. Young adults are vital to the future plans of the United States because in the next few years, a massive number of DoD employees will segue into the golden years of retirement. Acknowledging the potential human capital crisis, the Department of Defense (DoD) is actively working to attract talented young adults to govern-

ment jobs through branding and marketing the AT&L workforce.

My experience tells me that by focusing too much on the mechanics and packaging of recruitment, the government risks completely overlooking the aspect that should be the heart of recruitment and retention: the basic concept of personal interaction with the young. In many ways, my experience over the summer is testimony to the effectiveness of the AT&L workforce recruitment and retention effort, and an example of how personal interaction can make a positive difference.



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Schwarz worked for the Acquisition Workforce and Career Management Office while on summer break from Baylor University, where she is currently in her junior year pursuing a bachelor's degree in business.

My summer employment with the OSD was composed of a wide spectrum of experiences, a few of which stand out in my mind. Why did these experiences make such an impression on me? Because they shaped my opinion of the government in general and DoD in particular. Even more telling, virtually every positive opinion I formed over the course of the summer was directly related to personal interaction, and every negative impression resulted from a situation that lacked the personal touch.


During my employment with the government I met a variety of different people, was given an assortment of projects, and found myself in a vast range of situations. By explaining my impression of these events, I provide a reasonable reflection of how thousands of other potential DoD hires may react to similar situations. I think it will also become very clear how vital personal interaction is to successful recruitment and retention.

You Never Have a Second Chance to Make a Good First Impression

First impressions are fleeting, difficult to quantify, often subconscious, and they're formed within the first few minutes of interaction between two people. First impressions also apply to perceptions of an organization, the ambience of a workplace, and even the value of a job position. It's difficult to rewrite first impressions—fortunately or unfortunately, depending on whether they're good or bad. So making a good first impression is vital—and recently, making positive first impressions on prospective employees has not been one of the DoD's strengths.

Making the Search Easy is a Good Start

My first impression of government job opportunities formed far earlier than the first day of my summer internship. Early in April, when I decided to look into government jobs for my summer experience, I immediately turned to the Internet for information. Getting started was easy: go to Google; type in “government jobs”; and presto, < www.usajobs.opm.gov > shows up at the top of the list. At first I thought finding a job would be a simple process. But I quickly realized that “simple” was the wrong word;



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“painful” is a much more apt descriptor. The USAJOBS Web site made determining the requirements for each position extremely difficult. The job announcements were very hard to understand. They were long, used government jargon, and often the requirements seemed contradictory. Since I had no previous experience with government jobs, weeding through this information to identify what each job required was virtually impossible. I struggled with my Internet job search for several days, eventually applying for 10 summer internships.

Pointer #1—*A good starting point in the quest to hire more young people would be a more user-friendly Web site. USAJOBS would be much improved if job announcements were short and concise so that any ordinary person could take one glance and quickly identify key information.*

Friendly Follow-through is Vital

A couple of weeks after I submitted my resumes, I followed up by calling the contacts listed on the job announcements. After making only a few calls, I became discouraged. Not only was it extremely difficult to reach the contacts, but the ones I did speak with were unfriendly and hurried. I decided to wait it out until they contacted me. If I had continued that strategy, I would still be waiting today. Out of the 10 positions I applied for, only two agencies responded to my applications—by indicating I had not been chosen for the position. I never heard from the other eight.

Lucky for me that I have a family member who is a long-time employee of the Department of Defense and understands the government's hiring procedures. Her internal DoD contacts were able to suggest open summer internships, and my relative coached me through the remainder of the hiring process by telling me whom I needed to call and what paperwork I needed to complete. Without her, I would have been forced to look outside the government for summer employment.

A key to attracting and hiring potential young employees is to emphasize a process where personal interaction is a high priority. The current system acts contrary to this concept.

Pointer #2—*If individual government agencies responded to people personally and more effectively—for example, if people listed as contacts were available and helpful—the results would be immeasurably better. Imagine the positive first impressions these agencies could make on jobseekers fresh out of college. Talented young people would begin gravitating towards government positions instead of making every effort to avoid them.*

Hiring Qualified Candidates is Only the Beginning

My job search created a less than optimal first impression of government employment, but luckily, the positive experiences I had during my summer internship helped me to overlook parts of the negative beginning. The most influential of these experiences involved many of the people I met during my summer internship. The ones who stand out in my memory were not only friendly, but they also took an interest in my personal life. They asked me questions about my family, my school, my interests, and my goals. They found ways to relate to me, whether it was by telling stories about their own children who were close to my age or by relaying interesting facts about their lives that I could appreciate. As a young, shy college student in a very foreign environment, these personal interactions created moments in my day where I could be completely comfortable because I felt the people really cared about me. My only regret is that more people didn't make an effort to interact personally with me during the summer.

The Good Experiences Form Permanent Memories

One particularly memorable summer experience was my first visit to the Pentagon, where I attended an AcqDemo briefing as an observer. Not only was it exciting for me to be in the Pentagon for the first time, but "important people" were going to be at the briefing. It was quite different from anything I had ever experienced, and it was very interesting for me to observe interactions among people and the dynamics in the room. After the briefing, very few of the "important people" had time to speak to

me, and if they did it was only a quick introduction. This was perfectly understandable. They were all very busy people and had little extra time to do anything, let alone spend time talking to a summer hire.

But one of those busy, important people did talk to me and he made me feel like a million dollars. Claude M. Bolton, the assistant secretary of the army (acquisition, logistics and technology), spent 10 or 15 minutes talking to me about my life and sharing stories about his children, wife, and hometown. After our conversation, I remember being eager to learn more and do a better job. Bolton had inspired me with the possibility of someday having a job and an opportunity to work in an environment with people like him.

Pointer #3—*Speaking to Bolton for a few minutes made a lasting impression on me. That same lasting impression could be made on all summer hires and interns if government employees at every level of the organization made a priority of talking to them, making a personal connection. It's a small investment of time that could have a large future return in influencing young people to begin their careers with the Defense Department.*

Meaningful, Achievable Work is a Necessity

If visiting the Pentagon for the first time was my most memorable experience of the summer, number two on my list was the first time I completed a work project. A couple of weeks into my internship, just when I was beginning to get the hang of working, the deputy program manager for the AcqDemo, Mary Thomas, put me in charge of a project. She asked me to gather information from project employees and create a work breakdown structure that aligned every program office employee's tasks to the AcqDemo mission.

At first I was overwhelmed by the breakdown project. I didn't even know where to start. But with help from Thomas, I was able to structure the project. I spent hours gathering information from project employees and consolidating it into a document that met project requirements. When an interim version of the work breakdown was complete, Thomas asked me to present it to all the program office employees at an offsite department meeting. The objective of the presentation was to prompt further discussion and suggestions for improvement of the work breakdown. When the day came for my presentation, I was a little nervous, but everything went smoothly, and our discussion on the work breakdown was a success. As the offsite wrapped up at the end of the day, everyone in the project office was very pleased with my project and presentation. I received a number of compliments on the quality and organization of my project and my confidence in speaking to a small audience. I felt that I had done something worthwhile and a good job. Yessss!

Using the information and input I received from AcqDemo employees during the offsite discussion, I was able to revise and improve the work breakdown. Once the updated version of the breakdown was complete, the project was ready for phase two: briefing my boss, Ric Sylvester. When I entered Sylvester's office I probably looked nervous, but I quickly realized there was nothing to be worried about. He was nice. To lighten the mood and make me feel more comfortable, Sylvester began talking to me about my school. Once I started to feel more relaxed, I was able to present the AcqDemo work breakdown effectively, and when my meeting wrapped up an hour later, I had an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment. The breakdown showed how the AcqDemo was working to accomplish the overall mission, and it was going to serve as a valuable justification tool for the AcqDemo in the future. I had completed my project successfully.

Doing this project was 10 times more valuable than many of the other projects I was assigned during my internship—things like changing data on a spreadsheet and throwing out dated reports. Although those other tasks helped the office, they were not made meaningful to me and did not provide me any additional experience that would help prepare me for the future.

Pointer #4—*Interns can't expect to get only important projects, but even if the job assigned is just updating a spreadsheet, it's vital that someone explain the context and significance of the task, putting it into the broader perspective of the organization—otherwise the job will be perceived as make-work and of no real value.*

There's always a risk involved with entrusting an inexperienced person with a project that's vital to an agency's mission, but the danger can be far outweighed by the benefits both the agency and the intern gain from the experience. By taking time to mentor, guide, and personally interact with summer hires, superiors

can help them succeed. The net result is beneficial in the short and long term. The agency makes effective use of resources by having the summer hires contribute in a meaningful way. And the young employees not only build their confidence, but also gain experience completing important work, making them more competitive job candidates and more valuable employees in the future.

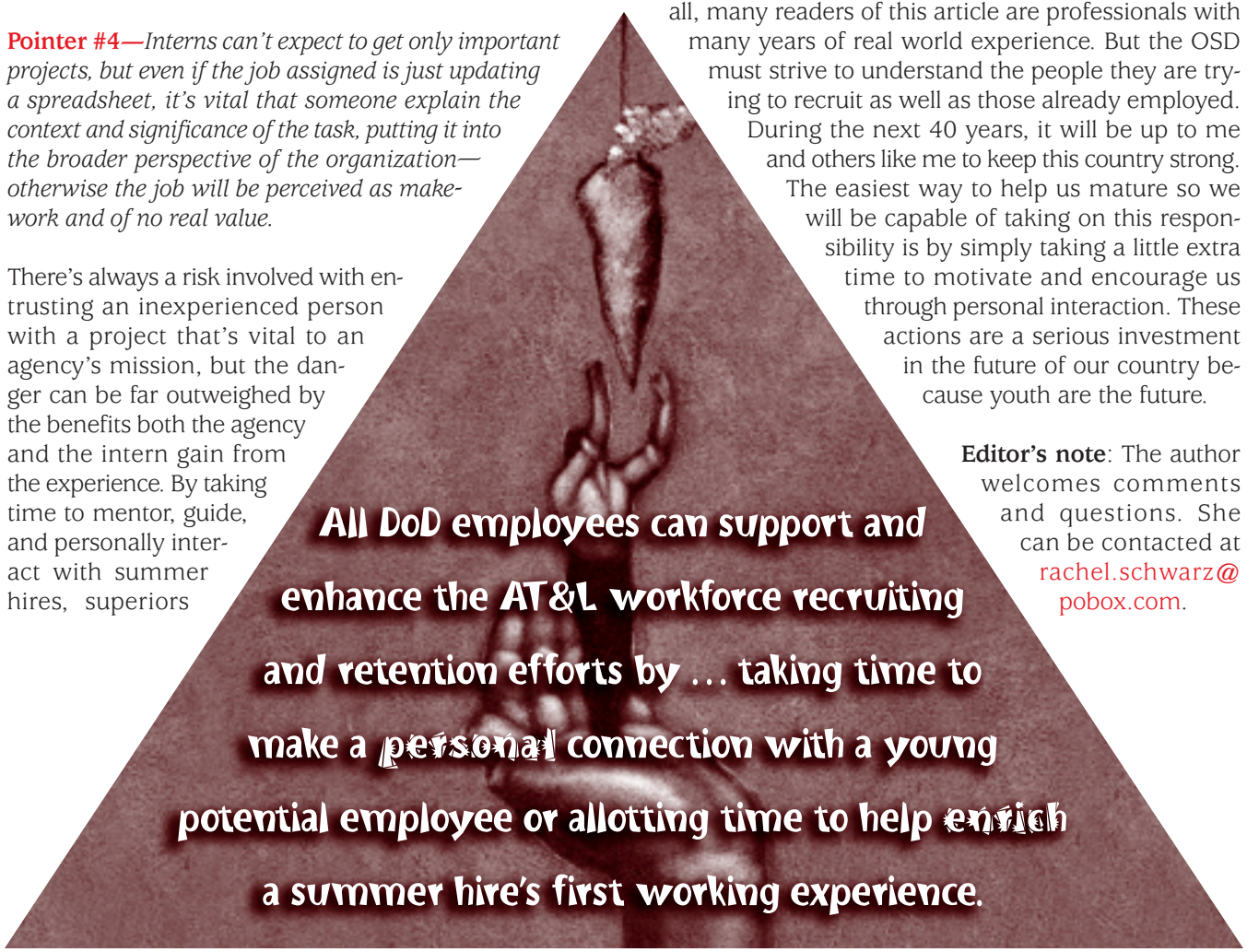
One Good Impression Can Influence a Thousand

Internships can provide summer hires with a vast amount of experience they can use to springboard into future careers. But that's not all. By doing everything possible to create positive experiences for these young workers, the government will be much closer to achieving future recruiting and retention goals.

Pointer #5—*All DoD employees can support and enhance the AT&L workforce recruiting and retention efforts by realizing the importance of taking time to make a personal connection with a young potential employee or allotting time to help enrich a summer hire's first working experience.*

I realize there's a possibility that the opinions of a young 20 year-old college student will be viewed as naïve. After all, many readers of this article are professionals with many years of real world experience. But the OSD must strive to understand the people they are trying to recruit as well as those already employed. During the next 40 years, it will be up to me and others like me to keep this country strong. The easiest way to help us mature so we will be capable of taking on this responsibility is by simply taking a little extra time to motivate and encourage us through personal interaction. These actions are a serious investment in the future of our country because youth are the future.

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